Global Business Languages

Volume 10 *New Initiatives* Article 12

May 2010

Issues and Trends in the Teaching of Business French for the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the current state of affairs in the field of business French through a consideration of recent developments in pedagogical resources and an overview of some of the theoretical points of view underlying this discipline, followed by a suggestion for future advances in this area.

Undoubtedly one of the greatest and constant challenges which instructors of business French face is the effect of a changing subject matter on the materials utilized in the classroom. The first few years of the twenty-first century have witnessed two major examples of such change with the inauguration of the euro into general use on January 1, 2002, and the expansion of the European Union from 15 to 25 members on May 1, 2004. The rejection by the French electorate of the constitution of the European Union in May of 2005 notwithstanding (and the impact of which has yet to be determined at the time of the writing of this article), these events have had a profound and lasting impact on France's relationship with its neighbors, which leads one to question if and how these phenomena will influence the teaching of business French as a discipline. One undeniable fact is that the recent events that are consequences of France's membership in the European Union are just some of the many current factors that have rendered many existing pedagogical materials for business French to a certain extent obsolete, as the content within these texts has become increasingly outdated. Similarly, the radical changes implemented in 2000 by the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris in terms of the exams administered by its Direction des Relations Internationales have had a considerable impact on the discipline of business French in two respects: first, on the methodologies in those business French classes for which the CCIP exams have traditionally been utilized as a means of measuring student competency and/or as a means of student evaluation; and second, on those textbooks oriented primarily to-

ward preparing students for these same exams. In fact, the textbooks are often used even by those instructors with little or no interest in the CCIP exams.

These few examples amply demonstrate to what extent the instructor of business French must constantly be in search of new resources. Both external and internal changes, such as those in the business climate in France and the Francophone world, the unending growth of the World Wide Web as a source of materials, as well as the publication of new textbooks and resource aids require instructors to regularly reconsider how business French can and should be taught. The present study will not attempt to provide an in-depth nor exhaustive inventory of the new materials available for the business French instructor (since these materials too risk becoming obsolete in time). The focus will be, rather, on some of those factors that are currently, and will in the future, have a significant impact on this field and the pedagogical materials associated with it. Many of these are, in fact, "internal," in that they are related less to changes in France and French business practices, and more to developments in perceptions of the field of business French among its practitioners.

One of the fundamental issues that must be confronted deals with the very terminology commonly employed to delineate this field; consequently, one might begin by posing the question: "What's in a name?" This article addresses a field traditionally called, at least in the United States, "business French." A glance at the titles of the textbooks that have been on the market since the early history of this discipline reveals that the words *business* or *affaires* have usually been included in their titles: *Le nouveau français des affaires*, *Parlons affaires*, *Affaires à suivre*, *Le français des affaires par la vidéo*, *Faire des affaires en français*, etc., to cite just a few of the best-known examples. Most other textbooks, if they have not featured in their titles either of these two words, have alternately featured the words *commercial*, as in Mauger and Charon's *Le français commercial*, or *entreprise*, as in Danilo and Tauzin's *Le français de l'entreprise*.

This nomenclature is equally evident in the pedagogical volumes published between 1995 and 2003 by the American Association of Teachers of French's commission on French for Business and Economic Purposes (whose name alone is significant). These volumes, the only ones of their kind in the United States devoted to the discipline during this period, all include *business* in their titles: *Issues and Methods in French for Business and Economic*

Purposes, Making Business French Work, and *Educating for International Expertise: Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Competence and French for Business*. Finally, the two regularly published journals devoted to "business languages" in the United States also reflect the trend: *The Journal of Language for International Business* and *Global Business Languages*.

It is important to mention these examples not to restate the obvious, but to contextualize them within an apparent shift, on the other side of the Atlantic, in terms of the categorization of this field that may, or may not, have an impact on how the discipline is taught in the United States in the future. This subtle development may be an indication of a change in attitude in France toward the field of languages for the professions, one that may have some influence on what French professors do in our own classrooms. The following two examples amply illustrate this point.

One is based on the author's own experiences. At the 2004 joint meeting of the American Association of Teachers of French and the Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Français in Atlanta, I went to a session presented by Guilhène Maratier-Decléty of the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris, and while waiting for the presentation to begin, was asked by the woman sitting next to me: "Vous enseignez déjà le 'FOS'?" [Do you already teach FOS?] As this was the first time I had heard the expression "FOS," I kindly asked her to explain. It was then that I first heard the term "Français sur objectif spécifique," which I subsequently heard on several occasions not only at that conference, but in my on-going research into new materials in the field of what may, or now may not be, "business French."

To provide a more concrete example of the use of this term ("le FOS") to refer to the subdiscipline in question, one may consider that of the manual published in 2004 by Hachette, authored by Jean-Marc Mangiante and Chantal Parpette, with the title *Le français sur objectif spécifique: De l'analyse des besoins à l'élaboration d'un cours*. [*French for a Specific Purpose: From Needs Analysis to Designing a Course*] The authors themselves make the distinction in their opening chapter between "le français sur objectif spécifique" and "le français de spécialité" (never mentioning the specific situation of "le français des affaires" in their introduction). They state: "Le terme *français de spécialité* a été historiquement le premier à désigner des méthodes destinées à des publics spécifiques étudiant le français dans une perspective professionnelle ou universitaire . . . Le terme *français sur objectif spécifique*, en revanche, a l'avantage de couvrir toutes les situations, que celles-ci soient ancrées ou non dans une spécialité" (Mangiante and Parpette,

16). [The term "français de spécialité" was historically the first to denote the methods intended for specific audiences studying French in a professional or university setting . . . The term "français sur objectif spécifique," on the other hand, has the advantage of covering all situations, anchored or not in a discipline.] The obvious advantage of the latter term is that is does not suggest a focus on one particular domain (the authors themselves mention medicine, law, agriculture, tourism, banking, and, finally, business). Yet this term is in itself vague and perhaps self-contradictory, seemingly including everything, yet implying specificity at the same time, complicated by the fact that the term "objectif spécifique," at least in this text, appears in the singular.

A second example is perhaps more relevant to the field of "business French," in that it comes from *Point Commun*, the publication of the Direction des Relations Internationales of the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris. The January 2005 issue of *Point Commun* presents two changes which demonstrate a slight shift in focus in terms of how the CCIP perceives this field. First *Point Commun* is now *Points Communs* (having changed from the singular to the plural), which, Guilhène Maratier-Decléty states: "... témoignent de la vocation de cette revue à devenir un lieu d'échanges entre chercheurs, entrepreneurs, enseignants et étudiants" (Maratier-Decléty, 3). [. . . indicates the charge of this journal to become a place for interactions among researchers, business people, instructors and students] One can hardly argue with the pluralization of the title based on this explanation, as it does indeed suggest a more "pluralistic" approach to the matter contained within.

The other change, however, is more striking; the subtitle of the publication, which was until issue 23 *La Revue du Français des Affaires et des Professions*, is, as of issue 24 (January 2005), *La Revue du Français à Visée Professionnelle*, which provides yet another term to consider, one which Mme Maratier-Decléty does not address in her editorial, where she explains the switch from singular to plural for *Point(s) Commun(s)*, but which she and the author had the opportunity to discuss during a meeting in February of 2005 at the CCIP in Paris. According to Mme Maratier-Decléty, the term "français à visée professionnelle" (like "français sur objectif spécifique," perhaps), is intended to designate a range of linguistic competencies inclusive of, but not limited to, the realm of the business world, with its particular vocabulary, contexts, and modus operandi. The skills that the student may acquire through a course based on the notion of "le français à visée professionnelle" are applicable to *any* employment or professional situation, not restricted to the domain of "business" (whose parameters are difficult, in any case, to delineate).

Hervé de Fontenay, in a paper at the annual conference of the American Association of Teachers of French in Québec in July 2005, offered a slightly different perspective on this matter, as he presented a progression in the "appellations" concerning the field generally known as business French that provides a distinctly chronological development in the use of these terms. He traced the origins of the discipline as a named entity to the 1970s when the terms "français fonctionnel" and "français commercial" were first used. Toward the end of the 1970s, "le français des affaires" was coined, to be followed by "français de spécialité" (whose name, de Fontenay suggests, derives from the English "language for specific purposes"). This new term was accompanied by a change in approach away from a focus on the French economy and correspondence skills to a more functional communicative approach. In de Fontenay's timeline, "le français de spécialité" is followed by "les français de spécialités," in which language instruction becomes increasingly isolated and reduced to a professional service. The final term which de Fontenay lists is "les langues des professions," indicative of a broader scope suggesting that courses in this field may address the needs of any student intending to utilize skills in the French language in any professional context.

Although de Fontenay's reflections on this terminology, in the context of his study at least, seem to portray an evolution in what we will loosely call "business French," one may nevertheless point out that all of these terms remain in current usage in speaking of this discipline. Indeed, there seems to be a tendency toward the interchangeability of terms, indicative of a lack of clearly defined parameters for any of the fields in question, if in fact they may be considered distinct subdisciplines.

Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear that the discussion of what those professionals involved in teaching and conducting research in business French call this field of study and the materials available for teaching it in the classroom are intricately related. Some of the textbooks published after 2000 in France amply illustrate this point. In particular, one might mention CLE International's "point com" series, which as of 2005 includes six titles: *français.com*, *affaires.com*, *tourisme.com*, *santé-médecine.com*, *banque-finance.com*, and *secrétariat.com*. For the purposes of the current discussion, we will focus on the material in the first two titles, *français.com* and *affaires.com*, both authored by Jean-Luc Penfornis, since they reflect the content of most business French courses in the United States today. However, it is noteworthy that the series as a whole reveals the increasingly dynamic and specialized nature of *le français à visée professionnelle* (or *visée*s

*professionnelle*s, *au pluriel* [French for a professional purpose/s], as the CLE International catalogue names this field).

In the case of the works by Penfornis, the very existence of two texts is particularly enlightening if one considers the orientation that each text takes. In the CLE International catalogue itself, *français.com* is described as "une méthode de français général tournée vers le monde du travail" while *affaires.com* serves as "une méthode de français des affaires." Yet the actual text of *français.com* has as a subtitle: *Méthode de français professionnel et des affaires*, suggesting its applicability to the more particular context of the business world. If we then proceed to a comparison of the two texts, we will find what one may consider essential elements of the traditional business French curriculum in each, forcing the instructor selecting a textbook for classroom use to once again question what content more adequately reflects the goals of the "Business French" class.

Penfornis's *français.com* focuses on those situations in which individuals, whether in a specifically business-oriented context or not, may find themselves when traveling to a French-speaking region. The first five chapters emphasize what one may call basic "survival skills" in, for example, business travel: "Prise de contact," "Agenda," "Voyage," "Hôtel," "Restauration." It is only with the subsequent three chapters that one enters into the world of business specifically, with the final two chapters devoted to oral communication skills, as their respective titles might indicate: "Prise de parole," "Points de vue." In the case of *affaires.com*, we encounter a text that, if one is to merely take the chapter titles as an indicator, more closely resembles a traditional "business French" textbook (the chapter titles being: "Acteurs économiques," "Créateurs d'entreprise," "Ressources humaines," "Marketing," "Correspondance professionnelle," and "Résultats et tendances").

In the case of both textbooks, however, there is one other objective explicitly named in Penfornis's prefaces: preparation for the exams of the CCIP; the *Certificat de Français Professionnel* in the case of *français.com*, and the *Diplôme de Français des affaires, 1er degré* (or DFA 1) in the case of *affaires.com*. Whether or not the instructor has the intention of preparing students for one of these exams, the fact remains that, in particular in the case of textbooks published in France (with Penfornis's texts being the more current example), the CCIP exams are the standard by which the content and format of business French textbooks are, in many cases, determined.

In other words, what this consideration of Penfornis's texts confirms is that the changes to the CCIP's exams that were instituted in 2000 have indeed had a significant impact on the content of business French textbooks

recently published (and, one can assume, to be published) in France for a non-native audience. The new *Certificat de Français Professionnel*, with its reduced emphasis (in comparison to the old *Certificat Pratique*) on translation (eliminated altogether), on explicitly business-related vocabulary, and on reading comprehension in favor of testing on more generalized business situations that, in most cases, do not require an in-depth knowledge of business vocabulary or the French business milieu, potentially allows students who have not gone through the "rigor" of a traditional business French course or course sequence to successfully complete the exam.

For many business French instructors, the new certificate is a welcome change, and for a variety of reasons. First, with the passing level of the old exam being beyond the reach of a good percentage of American students having completed a one-semester business French class, the new exam provides the opportunity for a more accurate evaluation of the basic competencies of students who have experienced the traditional college-level French curriculum. Second, the more general nature of the test allows students who have an advanced level of compentency in the language, with some basic understanding of the test content and format, the reasonable opportunity to pass the exam even without having completed a business French course. Third, and perhaps most positively for those instructors whose aim it is to have their students take the CCIP exam, the new certificate allows for greater flexibility in course content and design, since the instructor need no longer construct a course solely on the basis of the material included in the old certificate exam which, with its demanding and rigorous structure and content, required at the very least an entire business French course as preparation. There are undoubtedly pros and cons to the new certificate exam which, as the name indicates, is less a "business French" exam (which is more clearly the case of the DFA1), than an exam testing students' abilities to function in a general work environment and related situations; in other words, "le français à visée professionnelle" in its broadest definition.

Again, what is ultimately most significant about the changes to the CCIP exams is the impact that these changes have on textbook selection. With so many of the existing textbooks (at least those published before 2000) being oriented toward preparation for the old version of the exams (for example, the previously mentioned Le Goff's *Le nouveau French for business* and Berg's *Parlons affaires*, with their extensive translation exercises and their emphasis on business-related vocabulary), the choice of textbook may po-

tentially be rendered more challenging for those instructors orienting their courses toward the goal of having their students take the CCIP exams, as texts and evaluation method no longer necessarily coincide.

Yet as we look to the future of business French pedagogy both in France and in the United States, the CCIP has also enacted one other significant and positive change that must be mentioned, namely, the reconstruction of the Web site of the Direction des Relations Internationales de l'Enseignement (www.fda.ccip.fr). Among those Web resources available for business French, the CCIP's newly enhanced Web site is now undoubtedly one of the most valuable. Although the CCIP has always been at the forefront in terms of providing instruction on-site for both instructors and students of business French, the development of resources on-line is still a relatively new venture. Apart from being a much more "user-friendly" resource than its previous incarnations, the CCIP's Web site provides an increasingly voluminous amount of material for the business French instructor, in particular in the *ressources pédagogiques* available in the newly instituted "Mélopée" section of the site. Although an on-going project that will never truly be completed, "Mélopée" will become not only a source of supplementary pedagogical material, but a virtual (in both senses of the word today) text of sorts for the teaching of business French, with a complete program of *fiches pédagogiques* and exercices.

Other promising developments, many on-going or in the earlier stages of development, also demonstrate the efforts on the part of business French specialists to further the development of this field. The activities of the AATF Commission on French for Business and Economic Purposes, including my own CD-ROM, *Teaching Business French: Textbooks, Reference Tools, and Pedagogical Aids*, published by the AATF in 2005, illustrate both the desire and need in the early years of the twenty-first century for a continuous dialogue and exchange of ideas among those teaching business French, certainly in North America. Yet these occasionally isolated endeavors risk being lost if the avenues for such dialogue and exchange are neither apparent nor accessible to many instructors. Workshops such as those held at the University of Memphis and Ohio State University on an annual basis, and meetings such as the annual CIBER business language conference greatly facilitate interaction among those involved in this field, who often find themselves teaching a subject that suffers from a marginal stature at their home institutions. Indeed, this subdiscipline risks a continuing fragmentation as those

involved in teaching and researching this field lack a sense of unity of purpose or content, which the aforementioned projects and workshops cannot counteract by themselves.

In concluding his 2005 AATF paper, Hervé de Fontenay suggests some "pistes pour l'avenir," a few of which are worthy of mention here, and which address the concerns raised previously. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering his comments cited earlier about the constant re-naming of this field, de Fontenay proposes a "reconnaissance de statut," that those active in teaching and conducting research in the field of business French somehow come to an agreement about the precise definition and/or parameters of the discipline. Several of de Fontenay's other suggestions focus on assuring that "business French" avoids isolation in respect to other components of the French curriculum. This can be accomplished by assuring that business French courses are not what de Fontenay calls "des cours orphelins," with no consideration for the integral role they may play in a French program. In addition, de Fontenay encourages a *décentralisation* of the field away from the exclusive preoccupation (one that has existed since the early days) with France in favor of a *Francophonie globale*. Finally, de Fontenay proposes a (constant) reevaluation of the linguistic approaches to the teaching of business French, as we surely have not begun to exhaust the methodologies that will allow this discipline to be taught in the most effective manner possible. All of this suggests that much remains to be done to clarify and enhance business French (and, by extension, business language in general) as a discipline or subdiscipline within the foreign language curriculum.

It will be undeniably interesting to follow these actual and potential changes in the field of business French as they demonstrate a continuing interest in developing new materials (in the forms mentioned here of textbooks and pedagogical aids), improving existing resources (as in the case of the CCIP Web site), and constantly reevaluating this field and the means by which its content can best be transmitted to our students. At the same time, we are witnessing a parallel consideration of the criteria by which our students can be evaluated for their competency in this subject matter, if the CCIP exams can be used as a barometer for such an evaluation process. One can only hope that new resources will continue to emerge, that instructors of business French will continue to be provided with the most up-to-date information and materials as they continue to teach this subject, and that through collaboration and exchange of ideas, those involved will continue to allow this discipline to flourish.

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